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ABSTRACT

A research study explored the barriers to transfer of credit courses from two-year community and technical colleges to four-year colleges and universities, with special attention to the concerns of postsecondary occupational-technical program transfer. Several categories of problems were identified in the national literature on higher education transfer: attitudinal, institutional, geographical, financial, curricular, and structural barriers. Key issues and arguments in each category were explored and discussed. The research concluded that transfer of credits was more successful when community colleges separated two-year transfer programs and vocational-technical programs. A suggestion was also made that comprehensive community colleges with four-year programs might be better able to serve the needs of the diverse types of students who enroll in community colleges. (KC)

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GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF TECHNICAL AND ADULT EDUCATION

BRIEFING PAPER

SEAMLESS EDUCATION: BARRIERS TO TRANSFER IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Occupational Research Group

No. 3, Spring 1994

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This paper explores the barriers to transfer of credit courses from two-year community/technical colleges to four-year colleges and universities, with special attention to the concerns of postsecondary occupational-technical program transfer. Several categories of problems have been identified in the national literature on higher education transfer. These include attitudinal, institutional, geographical, financial, curricular, and structural barriers. Key issues and arguments in each category will be presented and discussed in this paper. The information presented here is representative of a national perspective on postsecondary two-year education. It reflects the research and study of community college experiences with transfer of students to senior institutions of higher education across the United States.

Attitudinal Barriers to Transfer

Perceptions of the professional status of community and technical college faculty by four-year college and university faculty often reflects an unwillingness to accept each other as peers. When faculty at senior institutions do not value the work of community college faculty as being equal to theirs, it can affect perceptions of community college student performance as well (NCAAT, 1991). This problem can be even more acute in postsecondary occupational-technical programs where faculty credentials may include relevant job experience or professional certifications in place of the traditional academic degrees valued by higher education.

Tensions resulting from teaching students with diverse capabilities in an open admissions college in contrast to the more academically proven students at selective colleges raises questions about the comparability of instructional standards, expectations, and outcomes between two- and four-year college classes (Knoell, 1990). Based on their high school record, many community college students who would not have been eligible for freshman admission at more selective colleges have been successful in community college courses. The community college function of remedial (pre-college level) education which provides this "second chance" for many non-traditional students, is also another basis for four-year college questioning of equity with community colleges. True or not true, the perception among faculty at many selective "senior" colleges is that the "junior" college transfer cannot handle upper-division courses at the major state universities.

Attitudinal barriers also include constraints on community college students educational expectations tied to socioeconomic, academic, and ethnic background factors that research shows affect the likelihood of transfer. That is, students with poor academic records, from low socioeconomic or minority backgrounds, are less likely to transfer for many reasons (Palmer, 1991). The short-

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term goal of gaining employment skills motivates many students to complete occupational-technical programs which are not designed to transfer, taught by faculty who do not encourage or expect their students to continue higher education (Grubb, 1992). Such motivational factors, along with student lack of information about transfer options, financial aid, or career planning do not encourage transfer.

Institutional Barriers to Transfer

The mission of the two-year college nationally has evolved from an initial narrow focus on junior college liberal arts education to a broader role that includes expanded commitment to remedial education, occupational programs, continuing education, and economic development training in addition to transfer education. The expanding mission of today's comprehensive community college is tied to local community-based needs and emphasizes accessibility, responsiveness, and comprehensiveness (Palmer & Eaton, 1991).

Concerns have been raised about whether the two-year colleges can do all of these things equally well--including the transfer function. Recent declines in community college student transfer rates nationally have been blamed on the growing "vocationalism" of higher education curriculum offerings, at both the two- and four-year levels. Community college responses to local job training needs are seen as occurring at the expense of academic offerings, limiting the options and expectations for student transfer (Grubb, 1992).

In addition, the community college philosophy of equal access, reflected in its open door admission policy and remediation functions, generates questions by selective admissions institutions about admissions criteria to assure competence for college level work by community college students who later apply for transfer. The issue of "access versus excellence" is one that can pose barriers for acceptance of two-year college transfer students.

Financial and Geographical Barriers to Transfer

Community colleges attract a high proportion of their students from lower socioeconomic groups and working adults with family and job responsibilities. The financial commitment of completing a bachelor's degree, given inadequate financial aid and limited personal resources for education, can be a significant barrier. Also, issues of geographic access and convenience or opportunity for attending four-year colleges as a commuting, part-time, evening student limit options for transfer for many community college students (NCAAT, 1991). New offerings in distance education can help to address this concern and increase transfer options for many place-bound adult students.

Finances are also a factor in the willingness of four-year colleges to accept transfer students. High demand bachelor degree programs with funding caps or restricted space are less likely to find transfer students desirable. Where four-year college enrollments are down overall or in particular program areas, institutions will be more open and flexible in articulation efforts with community colleges, since continued funding is dependent on adequate program enrollments.

Curricular Barriers to Transfer

The literature on transfer in higher education focuses primarily on the

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traditional liberal arts curricula and students. However, the realities of today's job market and the importance of lifelong learning have resulted in nearly as many occupational-technical college students transferring as those in academic/transfer programs (Grubb, 1992). The unfortunate labeling of students, programs and courses as either "occupational" or "academic" in the community or technical colleges has clouded the discussion about transfer concerns and barriers. The development of separate associate degrees for occupational and transfer purposes reflects the dualistic thinking that students will be prepared either for work or for continuing higher education, but not both.

The "applied" associate degree (e.g., AAS, AAT) was developed for the purpose of preparing postsecondary students for immediate entry into the job market, with only an occasional recognition of the possibility of ongoing higher education for these graduates. While the expression "terminal degree" is seldom used anymore to describe occupational degree programs, there is still an assumption that these programs are not designed to transfer and that occupational courses, while college level, will not count towards continuation into bachelor's degree programs (NCAAT, 1993). Liberal arts or general education components of the occupational degree may reflect an "applied academics," rather than the traditional freshman year coursework found in a bachelor's degree program. However, several researchers have questioned whether the terms "occupational" and "transfer" still serve to make meaningful distinctions, since both types of programs today lead almost equally to bachelor degree studies (Prager, 1988; Cohen & Brawer, 1987).

Prager (1988) has addressed the neglect of transfer needs of career-track students in community colleges, noting that only three discipline areas have dealt with issues of program design for continuing transfer by occupational-technical students: allied health, engineering technologies, and business. Yet possibly as many as 50 percent or more of all community college transfers since the mid-1970s have been occupational-technical degree holders (Cohen and Brawer, 1982). Opportunities for postsecondary career student transfer have not kept up with student demand and interest, resulting in duplication and loss of credits, time, and money when occupational students try to continue their education. Prager (1988) urges community colleges to consider transfer as an important facet of occupational-technical education and to inform students of advantages, opportunities, and prerequisites for continuing their education. Both two- and four-year colleges need to pursue expanded opportunities for transfer through collaborative curriculum development.

State Structural Barriers to Transfer

The statewide structure, organization, and governance of public higher education institutions have been studied as factors which influence transfer and bachelor degree completion. One of the key issues relates to the merits and problems of separate, specialized versus comprehensive two-year institutions and their organizational relationship to other colleges and state governing bodies. Specialized two-year institutions include postsecondary technical institutes focused only on occupational-technical programs, junior or community colleges offering transfer-oriented liberal arts programs, and remedial or adult education schools to address high school deficiencies. Comprehensive community colleges include a combination of career, transfer,

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remedial, and continuing education program and services within one institution.

The Comprehensive Model for Community Colleges

The comprehensive college bridges two separate systems of education and training in the United States. One is the hierarchy of traditional educational institutions from elementary through university, dominated by the goal of bachelor's degree completion and rooted in liberal arts and sciences. Another is work-related education and training including secondary vocational programs, postsecondary occupational-technical education in technical institutions, JTPA programs, workplace literacy programs, economic development efforts, welfare-to-work programs, and apprenticeships. The comprehensive community college enables those in short-term entry-level job training to access the larger educational system for continued learning. In addition, recent educational reforms such as tech prep and school-to-work transition are moving in the direction of integrating academic and vocational studies.

Arguments in favor of the comprehensive community college model are summarized by Grubb (1992). He argues that comprehensive colleges minimize problems with institutional transitions (new rules, procedures, roles, staffing, learning expectations) that can discourage continuation of education. Also, many adults entering postsecondary education need a combination of remedial, occupational and academic instruction, and support systems. Comprehensive institutions are better at coordinating services and providing multiple options within one bureaucratic structure.

The community college accommodates diverse goals of students. Many nontraditional students entering open door colleges may be unsure of long-term career goals or may lack confidence in their ability to succeed beyond short-term educational goals (entry-level job skills). Many are driven by immediate needs for employment, or short-term skills updating. Awareness of options for continued learning and the experience of success in community college classes create a desire for further higher education which can best be nurtured in an environment which offers multiple curriculum choices to accommodate changing student educational goals.

Separation of Transfer and Technical Education

Arguments in favor of separating the functions of transfer and occupational education are summarized by Paul (1993) who has studied the impact of structure between two- and four-year colleges on bachelor degree attainment rates. She found that bachelor's degree attainment was higher where adult and vocational-technical education were separated from two-year liberal arts or transfer programs, and where two-year programs were located either on a four-year college campus or in two-year colleges which were part of a total university system. Her research also shows that students who start their education at a four-year institution have a higher chance of completing the bachelors degree. Paul concludes that separating transfer education from occupational-technical and adult education is preferable, if the goal is increasing bachelor degree attainment.

The following reasons are presented by Paul to explain these findings: a.) in transfer-oriented colleges, the mission is more focused and the curriculum can be structured with university transfer in mind; b.) faculty and students both have

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expectations that transfer will occur and they mutually work towards this goal; c.) communication between faculty at these two- and four-year institutions is more open and equitable since community college faculty have credentials more comparable to university faculty; d.) the institutions are more accountable for transfer results since this is their only role, not one of many; e.) resources can be focused on academics and not dispersed across multiple, often costly programs; f.) sufficient enrollment enables a stable full-time faculty and diverse academic offerings; and g.) articulation efforts are more easily accomplished and successful, creating a smoother transition for students.

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